

'the oresteia'

Literature



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In their introduction of Aeschylus' 'The Oresteia', Robert Fagles and W. B. Stanford include E. R. Dodds' assertion that ancient mythology reflected the 'pathology of a culture ridden by its guilt' in the aftermath of many bloody wars and invasions. In Fagles' modern translation, he describes Aeschylus' trilogy ('Agamemnon', 'The Libation Bearers' and 'The Eumenides') as a work in which 'the dead pursued the living for revenge, and revenge could only breed more guilt.' If any other literary piece could satisfy such appraisal, it is Hamlet.

If hatred and grief are the main aspects of tragedy, Hamlet is a tragic hero with a distinctly 'Senecan', flavour. (Arkins) For C. & M. Martindale, 'Seneca was the closest Shakespeare ever got to Greek tragedy.' Senecan translations may well have supplemented the Latin plays studied by Shakespeare at school in Stratford- indeed, Brian Arkins claims that the Greek's influence was 'in the Elizabethan air', and T. S. Eliot wrote that 'No author exercised... a deeper influence upon the Elizabethan mind or... form of tragedy than did Seneca.' Cambridge itself was deeply influenced during the period, presenting two performances of 'The Trojan Women' and 'Medea' as well as another of 'Oedipus' between 1551 and 1563. (Arkins)

The revenge aspect of Seneca is clearly paralleled in Hamlet, where common inclusions such as restless ghosts and a 'self-dramatised' (A) hero combine with the Senecan obsession with *scelus*. This crime launches tragedy in the three stages detailed by C. & M. Martindale: 'the appearance of a ghost or Fury, the making of the avenger and the ritual revenge itself.'

Aeschylus's 'Agamemnon' expresses the cyclical nature of hatred and grief in the line 'Great crimes you don't avenge, unless you outdo them.' Arkins' analysis of these Greek influences on Shakespeare continues to include observation on form, where the Elizabethan playwright imitates the 'meditative soliloquy and stichomythia' utilised by his Greek predecessor.

Queen To whom do you speak this?

Hamlet Do you see nothing there?

Queen Nothing at all; yet all that is I see

Hamlet Nor did you nothing hear?

Queen No, nothing but ourselves.

Yet the 'Senecan conventions' detailed in Brian Arkins' essays are altered by Shakespeare in many ways. As Arkins acknowledges, 'Hamlet himself is not an avenger of the Senecan type', because of his infamous 'wavering before committing himself to revenge.' This modern critic considers the shocking expression of hatred and grief in Hamlet, the 'palpable presence' of evil, as a topic well suited to the 16th century audience, to whom horror; such as the that of the Tower and the mob; was no stranger.

Fagles' claims that the guilt of the Greeks was 'more than criminal... a psychological guilt that modern men have felt and tried to probe.' For Hamlet too, guilt is strongest before he has taken the criminal action which causes the deaths of both Polonius and Claudius, and; debatably though certainly obliquely; his own mother. For Hamlet, the concepts of hatred and

grief are bound by guilt, to create a mental torture conveyed effectively by Shakespeare, and poignantly by his players. The familial nature of the betrayals felt so keenly by the Danish Prince leads him to potent disgust at his own reluctance to fulfil his filial duty in avenging his father. As such, both personal principles and expectations of social code are shattered for Hamlet, and both hatred and grief are catapulted into the public arena by their sheer, all-encompassing intensity.

Othello, written shortly after Hamlet, is an exploration of partial guilt, of hamartia confounded by such nefarious interference as the hero can scarcely conceive. Surpassing the mere expression of Othello's own pain, this masterful play is rare in simultaneously evoking genuine grief among a contextually omniscient and consequently sympathetic audience. Indeed, the silent, continual dialogue that occurs between Shakespeare and his audience intensifies the tragedy of the events of the final act. These intonations allow audiences to experience some degree of prescient dread for the doomed General as early on as Iago's first revelations of hatred; which drive and direct the play in what has been described as a 'inexorable rush toward disaster'. (Barton 1971)

As powerless onlookers over Iago's malicious jealousy; which has infamously led to a trend of impromptu intervention by audience members attempting to advise Othello of the plot against him; leads critics to many different conclusions about Othello's fate. A. C. Bradley's romantic view saw the play's cessation imbued with a sense of audience passion and 'mingled love and pity which they feel for no other hero in Shakespeare.' In the programme for the 1971 RSC production, Anne Barton would also appear to subscribe to this <https://assignbuster.com/the-oresteia/>

sympathy, describing Othello's loss as 'one of the most agonizing things in Shakespeare'.

Conversely, T. S. Eliot, writing in 1927, was scathing about Othello's behaviour, saying 'What Othello seems... to be doing in making this (his final) speech is cheering himself up... he has ceased to think about Desdemona'. F. R. Leavis was similarly inclined, commenting in 1952 that Othello's own 'Self-pride becomes... ferocious stupidity, an insane and self-deceiving passion'. J. N. Smith suggests an impulse in Othello to 'restore (Desdemona) to her former innocence' by extinguishing her 'light', which overcomes the emotional turmoil so reminiscent of Hamlet, and described by Smith as a 'rift between... resolve and... emotion'. This confusion, whereby the Moor persists in referring to his wife in such terms as 'whiter... than snow' elucidates Othello's continuing love for Desdemona. It might be argued that Othello never achieves pure hatred of his young wife; except perhaps in his first impulses of outraged pride.

In this sense, though the sorrow of the company left to mourn in Cyprus is complete, audiences of this emotionally charged piece have long been divided over the extent of blame due to Othello for the devastation centred around him. Though the pernicious Iago could hardly fail to inspire hatred in a uniquely melodramatic, pantomimic manner, the grief inherent in such a distressing tale is tempered by the individual's reaction to the character flaws exhibited, and never truly repented of, by Othello. (Smith)

Desdemona, as the unattainable and unsullied ideal of the chastity Emilia has long lacked, is subject both to Iago's spite and to his lascivious desire.

Unconscious nemeses of Iago, Othello and Cassio are more successful, more desirable men; the latter of whom Iago himself describes as possessing 'a daily beauty in his life/ That makes me ugly.' Indeed, analysis of the play's final scene seems to highlight the disappointingly inadequate punishment this Judas receives. After so much malevolence, it seems unlikely that Iago will fall foul of his own conscience at Lodovico's behest.

Thus for the company of Othello in Elizabethan England, just as for the cursed House of Atreus in Greek mythology, the cause of grief and atrocity is simple human hatred. Though this darkness invariably precipitates a cycle of revenge, in the former case it also enjoys a distinct satisfaction.

In 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', Henchard is typical of the hamartia often employed in tragedy, and a perfect example of how literature often employs hatred as a vehicle for the onset of grief. Hardy's protagonist is afflicted by the heady mix of driven and volatile mentality that leads to his downfall. This ultimately tragic character supports the argument that the definition of hamartia as 'flaw' may itself be inaccurate. (Best) Alternative interpretation of this Greek concept as meaning any quality, even virtue, in excess, is concurrent with Henchard's lack of emotional discipline. It also fits with comment made by Hardy some 8 years before writing 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'. In his 'Notebook' the author states that 'A Plot, or Tragedy, should arise from the gradual closing in of a situation that comes of ordinary human passion, prejudices, and ambitions, by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off... disastrous events.' Accordingly, Henchard's own downfall is symptomatic of his failure to adapt his uncompromising, rash

determination to the complexities of rivalry with Farfrae, his ever-fluctuating relationship with Elizabeth-Jane and the running of his business.

Hardy was quoted in saying 'If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst.' Hardy supports this belief in leading Henchard to realise the error of his ways in the later chapters of 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'. Staring his own drowned likeness in the face, the impoverished former mayor realises humility and perspective previously foreign to him, and is inclined to improve himself, and repair the damage he has done in an anagnorisis of sorts. (Best)

This growth of spirit after a fall from grace is consistent with the view of Michael Henchard as an Aristotelian tragic hero as documented by Allingham. Though Beaumarchais considered that 'The nearer the suffering man is to my station in life, the greater is his claim upon my sympathy', in Aristotle's 'The Poetics' the author cites the tragic protagonist as being necessarily noble as well as wholly responsible for his own predicament. Hardy seems to incorporate both ideals in the character of Michael Henchard, who rises from the most humble position to an exalted one, before ending his life incontrovertibly poorer than ever as a result of his own previous hubris. (Brooklyn)

As Aristotle considered fitting for the tragic character; using Sophocles' 'Oedipus Rex' as reference; Hardy's Henchard is 'a person neither wholly good nor bad'. (Allingham) Thus, the character would have been likely to win the sympathy of those agreeing with Beaumarchais, because at some stage

Henchard has passed through most social echelons and stages of integrity, making him widely accessible.

Hardy does not appear to intend Henchard as a figure for revulsion or hatred. Despite his many errors of morality and judgement, it seems that this somewhat impetuous personage does essentially strive for righteousness. This basic decency is proven in his decision to remarry Mrs Newson and look after her as he failed to do during their youthful marriage, and then to honour his relationship with Lucetta by offering her marriage in order to lessen the social stigma she has suffered in his absence. However, the goodness here argued is severely called into question on several occasions.

The impulse to lie to the returning Newson as he arrives to be reunited with Elizabeth-Jane is despicable but for the reader's well-established understanding of Henchard's desperation for her company. An incident in a barn at Henchard's former trade yard whereby he challenges Farfrae to a duel may serve as a case in point. Though it seems the elder man's intentions to live sensibly and humbly are disregarded in unadulterated hatred of the human embodiment of his lost youth, prospects, business and respect, Henchard's ultimate inability to strike the fatal blow shows that even in extremity, this simple, intrinsically 'good' soul is a pugilist by circumstance, rather than by compulsion.

Almost every character in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' experiences grief, from Farfrae in his loss of wife and child to Henchard's excommunication from Elizabeth-Jane and her own mistaken mourning of her true father. It is well documented that Hardy's twin 'enemies of humanity' are Time and

Chance, (Allingham) and in Henchard's case these are supplemented by his character flaws; as confirmed by Hardy's reference to Novalis: 'Character is Fate.' (Allingham) Events seem, as previously noted in the context of Hamlet and Othello, to be precipitated by the inherently human, dangerously pervasive impulses of hatred, and concluded with grief of various natures and subtleties.